

Memorandum of Conversation

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APPROVED DEC

DATE: January 14, 1959

SUBJECT: Soviet Note of January 10, 1959 and Related Subjects

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Herbert Dittmann, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs,  
German Foreign Office  
Ambassador Wilhelm G. Grewe, German Embassy  
The Secretary  
Deputy Under Secretary Murphy *AM*  
Mr. Livingston T. Merchant - EUR Martin J. Hillenbrand - GER

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Dr. Dittmann, who had arrived on the previous day from Bonn, stated there were two reasons why the Chancellor had asked him to come to Washington: to hand over a letter to the Secretary from the Chancellor and to transmit the preliminary views of the Chancellor on the recent Soviet note and draft peace treaty. As to the letter (which had suggested the President not receive Mikoyan), it had been written on January 12 before the White House announcement was made of the intended Mikoyan call on the President to take place on January 17. In response to his request for further instructions, Dr. Dittmann had received a cable from Bonn this morning telling him not to hand over the signed copy of the letter and to request that the Secretary consider the advance copy already in his possession as void.

Dr. Dittmann noted that he had already conveyed the Chancellor's views on the Soviet note of January 10 to Mr. Merchant. He wanted to bring to the attention of the Secretary the very great concern of Dr. Adenauer as to the latest developments. The situation created by the Soviet note of January 10 and the attached peace treaty was much worse than could have been most pessimistically anticipated. The Chancellor saw no possibilities therein for a solution of the German problem or an easing of tensions. The worst new feature was that the Soviet Government plainly showed that it did not intend a peace treaty to lead to the reunification of Germany but to perpetuate the division of the country. Both the governments of the Federal Republic and

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the GDR were to sign the peace treaty which would provide for the sovereign and separate identity of each state. Therefore, the Chancellor could not accept the new Soviet documents as a basis for negotiation.

However, Dr. Dittmann continued, the Chancellor shared the Secretary's opinion that negotiations were necessary and that all possibilities would be examined and all doors kept open. The Foreign Office was drafting proposals intended to solve the German problem on the basis of the December 31 notes of the three Western Powers. The Federal Republic desired to cooperate as closely as possible with the United States during the next stage of preparations. It desired that consultations regarding a reply to the Soviets should take place in Washington. Thereafter, a new meeting of the four Western Foreign Ministers should be held. The Chancellor had met with Ambassador Bruce on the morning of January 13, and Dr. Dittmann assumed that the Secretary had been informed of the views of the Chancellor as expressed at that meeting. The Chancellor had asked him (Dr. Dittmann) to repeat these views particularly on the importance of maintaining free access to Berlin. The Chancellor believed that the three Western Allies should be prepared to maintain such free access even by force if necessary. The guarantees given on December 14 and 16 in Paris should be executed; otherwise the Chancellor feared serious repercussions in the entire free world.

The Secretary said he was not surprised at the fact that nothing the Soviets have said or done since their initial statement on Berlin had indicated any retreat or weakening of their position either on Berlin or on Germany as a whole. However, they had indicated, primarily through Mikoyan, that their November 27 note was not to be treated as an ultimatum. Mr. Murphy noted at this point that there had been several vague references to this on the Moscow radio. This, in a sense, met our position that we would not negotiate under threat or ultimatum. The Soviets may be expected to press their demands until they establish whether or not we are prepared to fight over Berlin. This would be the normal practice for the Soviets. The Secretary said that he was accused by some of practicing what is called "brinkmanship" i.e., when the Communists push us to the brink of war he did not believe in retreating. If we retreat under such circumstances they will keep pushing us from retreat to retreat until our moral position and Allies are gone. The Secretary said he believed that we must show we are prepared to fight as in the Quemoy-Matsu affair. In the present instance we are in a somewhat different position in having Allies directly involved with whom we must consult and work out a common position. In the case of Indochina, the United States was prepared to fight while France and the United Kingdom were not. The latter were able to make an armistice which was not too bad. It was not too bad because the Communists knew that if they pushed too much they would shove the British and French into alignment with us and they would fight. The same is the case in Berlin. There is no doubt about our basic position of firmness. We showed that in the case of Indochina and of Quemoy and Matsu, but we have Allies with whom we must work out a common position. In Indochina they did not feel so vigorous. We do not know how they will feel here.

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Having said that as a general proposition, the Secretary continued, one must be aware that application of the principle of firmness in the Berlin situation presents difficulties. The Soviets have us in a position where they can perhaps make us shoot first. Elsewhere they have been fighting as aggressors. In this case they could blow up bridges and erect road blockades to isolate Berlin and maneuver us into having to use force initially to maintain land access. To obtain the support of public opinion of our Allies and in the United States involves some real problems. There can be no doubt relative to the strength and courage inherent in our basic position, and we hope this is shared by the other countries involved.

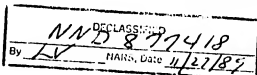
For the Soviets to start compromising at this relatively early stage, the Secretary noted, would be contrary to their normal techniques. After we have satisfied them that they cannot attain their objectives without fighting, we may have to provide them with discussions as a means to save face. The United States has been conducting talks with Communist China since 1955. These are not very promising, and it is hard to think up things to have our representative say. Time after time he must keep repeating the same thing. However, the fact that the discussions are going on tends to provide a protective coloration under which fighting can be suspended. The fighting at Quemoy-Matsu actually started when the talks were discontinued because of changes we were making in our Ambassadors. After the Communists saw our determination, they suggested that the talks resume. We did not expect to accomplish anything in these talks but they provided a means through which the Communist could back down. They may resume firing again but their effort of August has been discontinued. The Secretary thought it might perhaps be useful to have talks with the Soviets relative to Germany, and a meeting of the Foreign Ministers, but without an agenda limited in such a way that we would only discuss what the Soviets wanted to discuss. Their draft peace treaty was obviously unacceptable. However, general talks on Germany might be a useful cover at least for suspension of the planned Soviet measures relative to Berlin.

The Secretary said he felt that there could with advantage be greater flexibility in the thinking of the Federal Republic on reunification. The Federal Republic had a tremendous asset in the fact that an overwhelming percentage of the East German population was opposed to the present government and would like to join the free institutions of West Germany. The Secretary had an impression that the aloofness which exists to some extent plays into the hands of the Soviet and Pankow authorities by making it impossible for the Federal Republic to utilize these favorable assets in East Germany. This was only a general observation which might be difficult to express in concrete proposals. The Secretary felt that if the Federal Republic should come up with proposals involving more contacts with the people of East Germany behind the backs, or without the interposition of the Pankow regime, East German officials would be very frightened.

The Secretary

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The Secretary thought, therefore, that we should explore the possibility of meeting with the Soviets about Germany with the dual purpose of resolving the Berlin situation and perhaps coming out with some advantage. It was a remote prospect but the Soviets sometimes made sudden and unpredictable moves as in the case of the Austrian Treaty. The Soviets might after an unknown period of time - perhaps 1, 5 or 10 years - come to the conclusion that the situation was deteriorating in East Germany, and they might want to find a way out. We must keep pressing as we did for 8 years on the Austrian Treaty.

As to the suggested Working Group discussions among the four Western Powers, Mr. Marchant noted that Washington as a locus (which was desired by the Federal Republic) was acceptable to us, and we understood, probably to the British and the French at least as far as the drafting of a reply to the Soviet note of June 10 was concerned. A meeting of the four Western Foreign Ministers might not be necessary if progress in the Working Group was satisfactory.

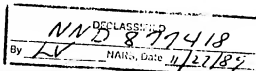
Ambassador Grewe said that he had received instructions to express concern as to the interpretation and effect of the Secretary's statements at his press conference on January 13 on the relationship of free elections to German reunification. The Government of the Federal Republic was afraid these would be interpreted as support for the idea of confederation as a first step towards German reunification, and that the Opposition in Germany would take advantage of the situation. It was felt that the position of the Government would be endangered unless some clarifying comment could be made. Coming at the time of the Mikoyan visit, the press would inevitably interpret the Secretary's remarks as indicating a change of American policy. Dr. Grewe referred to the discussion which had taken place this morning between Ambassador Bruce and the Chancellor. The formula suggested by Ambassador Bruce, if used by the Department in a public statement, would be welcomed by the Federal Republic.

The Secretary noted that the press can be troublesome when leading questions are asked, the answers to which are then misinterpreted or exaggerated. Referring to the specific three comments on free elections which he had made during his press conference, the Secretary asked what could be the answer to a query "Do we say, no free elections, no reunification?" One obviously could not take the position that reunification without free elections would not be accepted under any circumstances, as for example, in the case of a successful revolt in East Germany. The unification of the United States was not achieved via free elections but by the legislative action of the different states, nor was reunification in 1895 so achieved. If reunification came in Germany it might well be by some other method than free elections. To seek free elections is our policy and we see no better method now to achieve German reunification. However, the Soviets rightly fear that reunification might be forced by the people of East Germany, and we have no desire to allay their fears in this respect.

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When they agree to reunification it will be because their hand has been forced by the situation in East Germany.

At the Secretary's suggestion, Dr. Dittmann and Ambassador Grewe agreed that the latter should make a statement after the meeting that United States policy on free elections had been confirmed. (A text of such a statement was subsequently agreed by the participants at the meeting, and with the approval of the Secretary given by Ambassador Grewe to the Press. The text was transmitted to the field in DEPTTEL 1492 to Bonn, 6409 to London, 414 to Berlin and 2469 to Paris.)

The Secretary said that confederation as proposed by the Soviets obviously did not mean reunification but consolidation of the division of Germany. Any idea that the United States considered confederation of this kind acceptable was wrong. However, the Secretary could conceive of confederation on terms that might enable the Federal Republic to capitalize on the feeling of the East German people and get rid of the Communist government. If confederation gave an opportunity for a free expression of views by the East Germans relative to their form of government, it was not likely that the Soviets would be pleased.

As to the Mikoyan visit, the Secretary commented that the talks with the Soviet Official would not lead to any change in the policy of the United States, which would be reaffirmed. Mikoyan had been treated very well by the American people who are friendly and curious. However, they would not be fooled as to the basic reality. It was not envisaged that a communique would be issued after the Mikoyan meetings this week with the Secretary or the President. We will undoubtedly have to give some sort of background briefing to the press so as to make it more difficult for the Soviets to falsify the record. When Mikoyan saw the Secretary last week, the latter said he assumed that Mikoyan was not here to negotiate and that we were not planning to negotiate with him. Somewhat unenthusiastically, Mikoyan had apparently acquiesced. We would, of course, make efforts to minimize any misconceptions which the Soviets might try to create relative to the talks.

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